

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
OF
SIR WILLIAM KEITH,
ONE OF
THE FORMER GOVERNORS
OF
THE PROVINCE OF PENNSYLVANIA.
BY
A MEMBER OF THE BIOGRAPHICAL COMMITTEE.

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SIR WILLIAM KEITH.

AT this distance of time little information can be had in respect to a man who died upwards of seventy years ago, and has left no descendants or connexions in the country.

While he lived, he was an active and important organ of the provincial government, and may be conceived to have been a person of considerable mental powers.

Where he was found, and why he was selected by William Penn to administer the executive government, is not now in our power to ascertain. His surname would indicate that Scotland was the place of his birth or of his extraction. He certainly was a man of education, and, perhaps, from some circumstances, we might be authorized to conjecture that he was of the profession of the law.

In 1717 he succeeded Gookin, who had not been very popular, and the difference of his manners soon rendered

him a favorite of the people. His first address to the Assembly was calculated to win their affections at the expense of his own dignity.

We cannot at this time thoroughly comprehend some parts of the services which he alleges that he has already rendered.

Why he should have undertaken to present to the "Prince Regent" the address of the Assembly to the king, and why it should have been an "*expensive* application," we know not.

He next claims a credit with the people of this province, on the score of his having diligently, and at a considerable charge, obtained the commission of governor. We can hardly suppose that William Penn exposed the office to sale.

These are some of the mysteries which frequently accompany transactions of remote times, when no cotemporary pains are taken to prepare evidence.

On the death of William Penn, which shortly afterwards ensued, Sir William Keith appears to have been inclined to promote the interests of the elder branch; although the will of the illustrious proprietor strongly indicated that he considered the elder branches fully provided for by the Irish estate which devolved on them, and that the entire interest he held in the province of Pennsylvania should appertain to his children by Hannah Callowhill.

William Penn, the eldest son by the first wife, conceiving himself entitled to the government, whoever might be proprietor of the soil, soon sent out a commission to

Keith, appointing him deputy governor; which the latter accepted, although at the same time in a studied and ambiguous message to the Assembly he intimated some doubts—and he must have felt dissatisfaction at the widow's having transmitted the copy of the will to James Logan, without any communication to him.

In the mean time a perfect harmony between himself and the Assembly continued; they approved of his vigilance in respect to some Indians; they assented to his establishing a Court of Chancery, in which he presided; and the only dissatisfaction that his public conduct for a long time excited, seems to have been his preference of the dignity of this court to the conscientious scruples of the *Friends*. John Kinsey, a lawyer of considerable eminence, who was afterwards Chief Justice of the province, refused, from religious scruples, to uncover his head in the court, and an officer was directed to take off his hat. The Quarterly Meeting presented a very respectful address to the governor (which may be seen in *Proud's History*), and an order of court was thereon made, declaring that keeping the head covered should not be construed into a contempt of court, but be considered as an act of religious liberty. Why he, who had before that time claimed so much credit for the pains he had taken to procure the sanction of parliament to the admission of an affirmation in lieu of an oath, should have shown his disregard of a religious peculiarity to which the *Friends* were well known to be sincerely attached, it is difficult to conceive. It must for a time have diminished that popularity which with so much pains he had already acquired;

and he could not plead ignorance of their pertinacious adherence to a practice for which, in the opinion of the Society, there is the greatest authority.

I notice this particular as indicating the character of the man, without intending to enter into the history of his public administration. This history may be partly collected from the plain and impartial narrative of *Proud*, and partly from the panegyric of the *Historical Review*, printed in London, in 1749, and by many attributed to Dr. Franklin. Both agree that when his commission as Governor was suspended by the appointment of Patrick Gordon in 1726, he obtained a seat in the House of Assembly, as a representative from Bucks County, and that he took all the means in his power "to divide the province, embarrass the Governor, and distress the proprietaries."

He afterwards went to England, and soon afterwards addressed to the king a representation on the state of the colonies in North America, which has been inserted at length in *Burk's History of Virginia* (printed at Petersburg, in 1805). It is in some respects a very valuable document, as it embraces an account of the produce, commerce, and consumption of this country in 1728, more distinct and perhaps more accurate than can be found elsewhere. He represents that the colonies then took off one-sixth of the woollens of Great Britain, more than double that value of their linens and calicoes, a considerable quantity of East India goods, great quantities of English silks, &c., and he describes their naval commerce as very great and constantly increasing. He proposes

some schemes for consolidating the Provincial Governments, and enlarging and systematizing the power of the Crown; one of which is (probably with a view to an appointment in his own favor), that judges shall be sent out from England with a jurisdiction over the whole country, and to be independent of the Provincial Legislatures.

This advice, although well calculated to increase and prolong the royal authority, was not attended to, or perhaps was found impracticable.

Disappointed in this quarter, he made an effort to support himself as an author; and, in the year 1738, he published a history of the colony of Virginia, proposing to proceed with histories of the other colonies; but it is probable that this work, although not ill written, was not very successful, for he proceeded no further in his design. He died, it is said, in great poverty, in London, about 1749. His widow, Lady Keith, survived him several years. She lived immured in a small wooden house, in Third Street between Market and Arch Streets, with an old female attendant as companion, refusing all communication with society, and reduced to great difficulties for subsistence. The house itself, long after her decease, was rendered memorable by one of those melancholy casualties which sometimes occur, even in populous cities where help is most at hand. In the year 1786, it was consumed by fire, and four persons perished in the flames.

Sir William Keith seems to have been a selfish and an artful man, whose true character was perhaps not known

to William Penn at the time of his being appointed. His first ostensible attachment was to the popular interest in opposition to that of his employer, the proprietary; and his evident object was to enrich himself, not to contribute to the relief of the family at home. His next public step was to promote the interest of the elder branch instead of the younger. In this, he discovered little penetration; he offended those who he might easily discover had the power to injure him, and courted the favor of those who had no permanent benefits to bestow.

The remnant of his life was embittered by the consciousness of disappointed ambition and the pressure of hopeless poverty. He saw the younger branch, which he had opposed, rising rapidly in wealth and consequence, and the province, under the temperate administration of Gordon, peaceable, prosperous, and contented.

In the work I have last mentioned it is said that the "ghosts of departed governors" were to be frequently seen wandering about the vast metropolis of the British Empire; and among these, perhaps, that of Sir William Keith was not the least querulous and unhappy.

SIR WILLIAM KEITH, DR. GRÆME, AND MRS. FERGUSSON.

Sir William Keith, whose grandfather was created a baronet of Nova Scotia in 1663, "was of the family of Powburn in the north of Scotland," and came to America in May, 1717, with his wife Ann, who, at the time of her marriage, was the widow of Robert Diggs. By this marriage Sir William had no issue, although by a former he had certainly two, if not more, children.

Alexander Henry Keith, who is described in a deed and in a mortgage upon record as his "eldest surviving son," and of "New Castle on Delaware," appears to have died before 1749, and Robert, who at that date is mentioned as his only son and the inheritor of the title, was a lieutenant-colonel in the Prussian service. In 1718 Sir William purchased what was afterwards, when it became the property of Dr. Græme, known as "Græme Park"—a tract of 1200 acres in Horsham Township, and formerly in Philadelphia, but now in Montgomery County, about eighteen miles northwest of the city, where he erected a spacious house. The following description will convey an idea of its character: "The ancient house is still standing (1855) in good preservation, although at present unoccupied, and is built of the brown sandstone of the neighborhood. On measurement I found it sixty feet in front and twenty-five in depth. Each story is divided into three rooms; the drawing-room, which occupies the north end of the building, is twenty-one feet square and fourteen feet high. Its walls are elegantly wainscotted to the ceiling, and the fire-place and mantel are composed of clouded marble brought from England. In the fire-place of the second-story room on the south end is an iron plate with the date 1728. The rooms to the very roof are all handsomely finished with mouldings on the ceilings. The stairs and banisters are extremely substantial, and built of oak. On the front wall of the house the remains of an ivy are seen. On the wall of the south end is a vigorous young trumpet flower (*bignonia*) growing, said to be a shoot of one which grew there in Mrs. Fergusson's time, and to the writer was an object of interest. In the rear is a fish pond, supplied by a spring of excellent water near by. The house as well as fish pond were built by Governor Keith between the years 1722 and 1728; everything else about the premises is modern."

Lossing, in his recent biographical work entitled "Our Countrymen," says, "The only baronial hall yet in existence in the United States is that of Sir William Johnson, at Johnstown, a few miles

north of the Mohawk River." Græme Park is perhaps the only exception to this statement, and was built a number of years previous to Johnson Hall.

Sir William, after many vicissitudes, died on the 18th of November, 1749, in the Old Bailey, London (*Gentleman's Magazine*, 1749, p. 524), and Lady Keith July 31, 1740, aged sixty-five, and was buried in Christ Church-yard, Second street.

Dr. Thomas Græme, who came to America with Keith, "was born at the family seat at Balgowan, in Perthshire, Scotland, October 20, 1688," and was married in Christ Church, Philadelphia, November 12, 1719, to Ann Diggs, a lady of considerable mental endowments and great worth of character, who was the only child of Lady Keith by her former husband, Robert Diggs, already mentioned.*

Dr. Græme was a person "of excellent education and agreeable manners," and, in the words of Dr. Rush, "for nearly half a century maintained the front rank in his profession." In 1726 he was appointed by his wife's stepfather, Governor Keith, a member of the Council; on the 8th of April, 1731, a Judge of the Supreme Court of the province, a position which he retained until 1750; from 1751 to 1753 he was physician and surgeon to the Pennsylvania Hospital, and, besides other offices, held for many years that of Collector of the Port of Philadelphia. His city residence was on the north side of Chestnut, below Seventh street, on the site afterwards occupied by the Arcade, then a very rural spot. During a portion of the year he lived at the "Park," the seat of elegant hospitality, and to which the attractive influence of his accomplished daughter lent an additional charm, and it was here that, on the 14th of September, 1772, he suddenly died, aged eighty-four years.

Dr. Græme had eleven children, the most celebrated of whom was Elizabeth, born February 3, 1739, and who, April 21, 1772, became the wife of Henry Hugh Fergusson, a native of Scotland, and who was related to the celebrated Adam Fergusson. The Revolution separated them, and it was Mrs. Fergusson's lot to spend but two

* Francis Hopkinson, while on a visit to Græme Park, in 1765, composed an elegy to the memory of this lady. These are the concluding lines:

"Oh! may I strive her footsteps to pursue,
And keep the Christian's glorious prize in view;
Like her defy the stormy waves of life,
And with heroic zeal maintain the strife;
Like her find comfort in the arms of death,
And in a peaceful calm resign my breath."

and a half years of her married life with her husband. The literary abilities of Mrs. Fergusson were considerable. She also wrote very graceful poetry. Possessing an excellent mind, cultivated by careful and extensive reading and study, also very remarkable powers of conversation, with much amiability of character, Mrs. Fergusson was greatly esteemed and her society much sought.

During the Revolutionary war she evinced friendship for her country, and by Washington was held in much regard, who more than once was hospitably entertained at Græme Park.

Mrs. Fergusson died without issue 23d of February, 1801, aged sixty-two years.

Jane Græme, a sister of Mrs. Fergusson, became the wife of Mr. James Young, and had three children. Ann, the eldest child, married William Smith, M. D., a graduate in 1771 of the Medical Department of the College of Philadelphia. The late Samuel F. Smith, for some years President of the Philadelphia Bank, was a son by this marriage, and Mrs. Ann Young Smith inherited the literary talent of the family, and also wrote verse with facility and grace. The following lines are from her pen.

AN ELEGY TO THE MEMORY OF THE AMERICAN VOLUNTEERS WHO
FELL IN THE ENGAGEMENT AT LEXINGTON ON THE 19TH OF APRIL,
1775.

Let joy be dumb, let mirth's gay carol cease,
See plaintive sorrow come bedew'd with tears;
With mournful steps retires the cherub peace,
And horrid war with all his train appears.

He comes, and crimson slaughter marks his way,
Stern famine follows in his vengeful tread;
Before him pleasure, hope, and love decay,
And meek-eyed mercy hangs the drooping head.

Fled like a dream are those delightful hours,
When here with innocence and peace we roved,
Secure and happy in our native bowers,
Blest in the presence of the youths we loved.

The blow is struck, 'which thro' each future age
Shall call from pity's eye the frequent tear;
Which gives the brother to the brother's rage,
And dyes with *British* blood the *British* spear.

Where'er the barb'rous story shall be told,
The British cheek shall glow with conscious flame,
This deed in bloody characters enroll'd,
Shall stain the lustre of their former name.

But you, ye brave defenders of our cause,
The first in this dire contest call'd to bleed,
Your names hereafter crown'd with fresh applause
Each manly breast with joy-mixt woe shall read.

Your memories, dear to every free-born mind,
Shall need no monument your fame to raise;
Forever in our grateful hearts enshrined,
And blest by your united country's praise.

But oh! permit the muse with grief sincere
The widow's heartfelt anguish to bemoan,
To join the sister's and the orphan's tear,
Whom this sad day from all they loved has torn.

Blest be this humble strain, if it imparts
The dawn of peace to but one pensive breast;
If it can hush one sigh that rends your hearts,
Or lull your sorrow to a short liv'd rest.

But vain the hope, too well the bosom knows
How faint is glory's voice to nature's calls;
How weak the balm the laurel wreath bestows,
To heal our breast when love or friendship falls.

Yet think they in their country's cause expired,
While guardian angels watch'd their parting sighs,
Their dying breasts with constancy inspired,
And bade them welcome to their native skies.

Our future state is wrapt in darkest gloom,
And threat'ning clouds, from which *their* souls are freed,
Ere the big tempest bursts they press the tomb,
Not doom'd to see their much loved country bleed.

Oh! let such thoughts as these assuage your grief,
And stop the tear of sorrow as it flows,
Till time's all-powerful hand shall yield relief,
And shed a kind oblivion o'er your woes.

But oh! thou Being infinitely just,
Whose boundless eye with mercy looks on all,
On Thee alone thy humble people trust,
On Thee alone for their deliverance call.

Long did Thy hand unnumber'd blessings shower,
And crown our land with liberty and peace;
Extend, O Lord, again Thy saving power,
And bid the horrors of invasion cease.

But if Thy awful wisdom has decreed
That we severer evils yet shall know,
By thy Almighty justice doom'd to bleed,
And deeper drink the bitter draughts of woe,

Oh, grant us, Heaven, that constancy of mind,
Which over adverse fortune rises still,
Unshaken faith, calm fortitude, resign'd,
And full submission to Thy holy will.

To Thee, eternal parent, we resign
Our bleeding cause, and in Thy wisdom rest;
With grateful hearts we bless Thy power divine,
And own resign'd, "whatever is, is best."

SYLVIA.

PHILADELPHIA, May 2, 1775.

The particulars of this sketch are derived from the materials kindly placed at our disposal by Mr. J. B. Lippincott, which were gathered by the late Mr. Henry C. Wetmore in view of the publication of a work principally relating to Græme Park, and those associated with its history and with that of the Revolution. The appearance of the volume, we regret to say, was arrested by the death of its lamented author.

Some account of the political character of Keith may be found in a "Narrative" written in 1726, and edited by Mr. Joshua Francis Fisher; in which the conduct of Sir William during his government of the province is very severely dealt with. — *Memoirs of Historical Society*, vol. ii. part 2. — EDITOR.